

The English Education Reform Plan: Hopes versus Reality

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The most recent iteration of English Education Reform in Japan by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has incorporated aspects of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This is a welcome addition due to the value the CEFR brings in clarifying what learners are able to do for the learners themselves, their teachers and other stakeholders in the education process, including universities and future employers. However, while the use of the CEFR has many potential benefits, its implementation in the newest reforms does not appear to have come close to getting the most out of this potential. This paper will outline how the creators of the CEFR intended it be used before examining how it has been incorporated into the most recent English language Education reform, and suggesting some areas where the implementation could be improved.

The CEFR: Transparent, Coherent and Comprehensive

First published in 2001, the CEFR “was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency” (Council of Europe, 2019). The thinking behind it was that if teachers from across Europe had a common frame of reference to work from, they would be better able to collaborate, innovate and reform language education in the school system there (North, 2014, p. 9). That is, by providing a framework of graded scales describing what learners are able to do as they progress along the path to learning a new language, students themselves will have a clear set of benchmarks to attain, language teachers will have a shared set of terms to use when discussing students and planning courses/lessons, and assessment of overall language ability will be framed by a set of shared terms.

The key ideas here are *transparency*, *coherence* and *comprehensiveness*. Specifically, the framework includes a Global scale of descriptors, self-assessment grids, and a wide range of illustrative scales to be adapted and used to suit the contexts in which the learning is taking place. This shared terminology promotes *transparency*, the graded nature of framework aids *coherence* and the wide range of descriptors (Global Scale, self-assessment grids and illustrative scales) provides a *comprehensive base*, ideally an evolving base as teachers adapt

the framework to their local situations, from which to plan, deliver and assess language learning. Having been introduced in 2001, the Council of Europe assessed its impact in 2007 (North, 2014) and found that it was having an increasing effect on foreign language learning. Teachers found that their classes required greater emphasis on orality. Also, learners were displaying increasing familiarity with the levels, which indicated the framework was promoting learner control and student centered language learning. Another interesting takeaway from the 2007 stock take was that CEFR was beginning to have a serious impact on teacher training (2014, p. 2) and the report recommended the development of a database of model activities that are linked to the CEFR. Moreover a need for the provision of teacher training seminars to raise competence and provide a means for teachers to exchange tips on good practice was identified (p. 5).

With the aim of the CEFR being to facilitate reflection, communication and networking, it's important to note here that the CEFR is largely a bottom up type resource. While there is a global scale, which I'm sure any reader would be familiar with, the Council of Europe has always made it clear that their aim is not to tell teachers what objective to pursue, or what methods to use (Council of Europe, in North, 2014, p. 10). The comprehensive nature of the illustrative scales is meant to promote appropriate, learner centered outcomes being at the center of all learning efforts (O'Dwyer et al, 2017, p. 9).

Don't go Global

The first implication of this is that while it is tempting for administrators to key in on the Global Scales as overarching goals to be assessed, that is precisely not how they are designed to be used. The Illustrative Scales provide a much fairer set of performance goals that are more easily adapted to individual contexts. Moreover, learners are more likely to display abilities across a range of the Global Scales. As such it is important to gather a profile of what students can do across a range of the Illustrative Scales, as opposed to looking to level check students by simply using the Global Scales. As O'Dwyer et al (2017) point out; the CEFR offers an apparatus that can be used to develop differentiated standards appropriate to contexts (p. 13).

To illustrate this point, take the following example. The B1 Illustrative Scale for **Reading Instructions** states that the learner *can understand clearly written, straightforward instructions for a piece of equipment*. In contrast the B1 Illustrative Scale for **Reading for Information and Argument** states that the learner *can recognise the line of argument in the treatment of the issue presented, though not necessarily in detail and can identify the main conclusions in clearly signalled argumentative texts*. Obviously, the later goal might be more appropriate for a very strong high school learner of English wanting to study Liberal Arts, whereas the former goal is

more suited to engineering. Logically then, it would make sense for students to be stronger at the parts of the Illustrative Scales that best match their language learning goals.

The CEFR provides a framework to provide student centred goals, but that means by teaching to the needs and goals of individual learners, and gathering a profile of what they can do, learners are likely to have spiked profiles on the Global Scale. They may, in fact should, be more proficient at some aspects of the Illustrative Scales than others. Consequently, an appropriate needs profile is going to provide a much fairer assessment of what the student can do solely than the Global Scale. Thus, it is important not to put too much focus on the Global Scales when assessing learners.

Japan's English Education Reform Plan

This brings us to the way the CEFR has been incorporated in Japan's English Language reform. The newest iteration of The Courses of Study outlined by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2014), in terms of the English language component, it does make an attempt to better integrate and coordinate the content taught from elementary through to university entrance. According to MEXT's Special Feature 3 The Progress of Education Rebuilding Toward the Future (MEXT, 2014) "it is necessary to secure and improving [sic] the quality of high school education, improve the selection process for university entrants and promote a qualitative transformation in university education by seamlessly connecting and coordinating these aspects" (para. 25). This stated desire to provide a more transparent, coherent and comprehensive overall framework for English Language education appears to mirror the origins of the CEFR. After all, the goals from elementary school through to university entrance are tied to the CEFR global scale. However, the gap between stated goals and reality is considerable, as will now be discussed in terms of teacher training and professional development, and the overall coherence of the stated goals.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The first area of concern I have regarding preparing teachers to implement MEXT's reform is that teachers simply do not have the English language ability required for the task. According to the English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization (MEXT, 2014) from junior high school English lessons will be "conducted in English in principle" and high school lessons will "be conducted in English with high-level linguistic activities (presentations, debates, negotiations). In order to conduct classes in English, a fairly high level of English, and or confidence, is required on the part of the teacher. However, as North (2014) states point blank, teachers cannot be confident in their ability to deliver classes in the L2 "if their overall level is A2 or B1" because;

At that level they cannot follow the implications of the CEFR and, through the medium of the L2, manage more flexible classrooms, move away from the course book, follow up the interests of the learners or exploit events in the real world. Such a teaching requires a flexibility that presupposes a relatively high degree of competence in the language. If local policy requires teachers to teach in the target language when they lack confidence in their performance, they will inevitably tend to stick rigidly to a narrow script where they feel more comfortable (p. 232).

Teachers below a very strong B2 would struggle mightily to use English with the flexibility needed to conduct the kinds of classes envisioned in the new reform plan, particularly at the high school level. This may be why the plan states that all “English subject teachers must prove English capabilities by passing Grade pre-1 in the Test in Practical English Proficiency (EIKEN)” (MEXT, 2014). According to EIKEN, Pre-1 is equivalent to B2 on the CEFR. The author, however, suspects that this equivalency is optimistic to say the least on the part of EIKEN. For instance, in the IELTS test, the B2 rating on the Global Scale is covers band scores ranging from 5.5 to 6.5, and any examiner knows that there is a huge difference in ability from 5.5 to 6.5. Just how accurate the EIKEN test is, is debatable, as is the accuracy of all privately run exams. But even if teachers who attain a pre-1 on the EIKEN are solid B2s, 35% of high school teachers, and 67% of junior high school teachers have not yet attained this level (NHK, 2018, para. 2).

To this observer at least, it seems that not enough consideration has been given to improving the language skills of the teachers implementing the new English curriculum. The first step should be to provide opportunities for current and future teachers to gain and sustain sufficient English ability to implement the new curriculum, and then a valid and reliable way to assess English proficiency for teachers needs to be developed. If MEXT insists on using private test providers, in my opinion, they should at least take an honest look at the claimed CEFR equivalencies to ensure that teachers have sufficient English ability. It appears that the board of education *hopes* that teachers will develop the level of English required to implement their reform, but very little has been produced by way of concrete plans has been produced to ensure that they do in fact have the proficiency required.

This lack of support for teachers to implement MEXT’s guidelines is nothing new. In 2012, Tahira (2012) raised the issue with regards to the shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT). It was claimed that despite a policy shift “the teaching principles advocated by MEXT are not fully practiced and understood by teachers” (p. 3) and that more support was needed. This doesn’t bode well for teachers who have to implement this latest plan. If MEXT are interested in applying the principles behind the CEFR to English language education in Japan, which isn’t a given, then

they would do well to note the surveyed perceptions of language teachers in Japan who have actually attempted to implement the CEFR in their courses. Most indicated that they had had substantial trouble using it, and cited a lack of resources, a lack of teacher training and a lack of understanding of the framework (O'Dwyer et al, 2017, pp. 33-34). Whether MEXT has the know-how and resources to provide such support is questionable, the need for resources and training is not in question.

We're Going Global

The other area of concern regarding the new reform plan regards the overall coherence of the goals and intended content for students themselves. Leaving aside the situation in elementary schools, the guidelines state that junior high school English classes will nurture “the ability to understand familiar topics, carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English” (MEXT, 2014). A quick look at the CEFR Global scale makes it clear that these goals correspond very closely to the input and output aspects of the B1 and A2 descriptors respectively.

B1	<u>Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters</u> regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
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A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a <u>simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters</u> . Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
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The high school plan states that students will develop “the ability to understand abstract contents for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons. Classes will be conducted in English, with high-level linguistic activities (presentations, debates, negotiations) (MEXT, 2014). Again, the plan seems to bear a striking resemblance to the proficiency levels outlined on the Global Scales, this time in the B2 range (see below). These plans seem very ambitious, given the amount of class time students have. The abstract nature of the required English content is reinforced by the note in the reform plan which adds that one aspect of the English lessons will be to “Enrich educational content in relation to nurturing individual's

sense of Japanese identity (focus on traditional culture and history among other things). This kind of content is clearly in the B2 range and would be challenging for most teachers, as discussed earlier, let alone students.

B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and <u>abstract topics</u> , including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can <u>interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain</u> for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and <u>explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options</u> .
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It appears that the Global Scales have been applied as a set of performance goals for teachers and students to go after, which is precisely **not** how it was designed to be used, as discussed earlier. The problem with this is that the content itself is too difficult for most Japanese students, particularly the high school content.

Compounding the overall incoherence of the reform plan is that it states that the overall aim is for students to aim to pass Grade 2 or above in the Test in Practical English Proficiency. Some MEXT documents state that the goal for high school graduates is to pass Grade 2, but others state that the goal is for 50% to pass pre 2 (MEXT, 2014 and Keidanren, 2016). If the lower goal is true, that means that MEXT is intending that all high school students participate in content and tasks in the B2 range of the CEFR, whilst expecting that half of the students will not be able to attain proficiency beyond the A1 level. This simply does not make sense. This means that the content being covered in class would be suitably challenging for independent users of English, but the stated goal accepts that half of high school students will not progress any further along than basic user level. What part of lessons, if “conducted in English in principle”, would a basic user of English be able to participate in meaningfully? In a mixed ability classroom, how will students be able to communicate in negotiations and debates with classmates of such varied abilities? As a language teacher, I wouldn’t know where to start if my institution proposed a curriculum along these lines. The whole proposal seems incoherent to this observer, as the goals and content are too difficult and the assessment goals do not match the proposed content. For this document to have been made public suggests that MEXT has little understanding of the process of either language learning or how to appropriately assess achievement.

Conclusion: Mexico won't pay for it

To sum up, the inclusion of CEFR benchmarks in the English Education Reform *could* be a positive development. The transparent, coherent and comprehensive nature of the framework is a good place to start any language reform, given that it was intended to promote reform in the first place. Unfortunately the application of the CEFR to the current reforms is incoherent and it appears that the Global Scales have been superficially tagged onto the reforms in the form of a wish list of what MEXT would like Japanese students to be able to do, without any real commitment to the principles the framework is based on. Problems with the plan are that teachers do not have the L2 proficiency or a strong enough understanding of the principles behind it to implement it. Furthermore, there is the lack of coherence in the plan, with stated goals being much too difficult for high school students, let alone teachers, and the proposed level of assessment being out of kilter with the proposed content. Given the incoherent nature of the plans goals and content (this paper hasn't even looked at the pitfalls of farming out assessment of students to private companies), it seems likely that at this stage teachers will struggle to implement the plan with much success. Those who see the value of implementing the CEFR in a Japanese context have many opportunities to improve this situation. In response to the current situation, I intend to find out how teachers are interpreting the reform plans and what they need in terms of training and resources.

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